

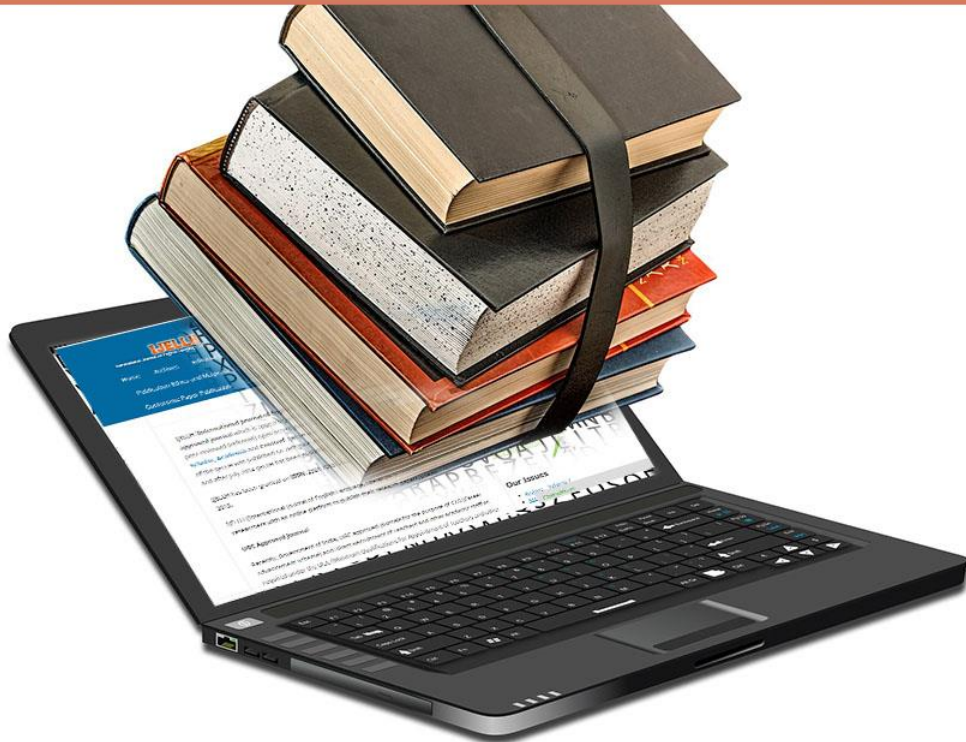
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**Woman And Bodily Harm : A Study Of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors***

**Abstract**

Indian writing in English is a postcolonial product expressing the state and thought of the colonized in the decolonized period. The 'novel' as a form of writing was introduced in India only in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indian English novelists during the post-independence tried to show the tragedy of the 'partition'. Further, they presented the continuing corruption, inefficiency and misery. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan became the inaugurators of the form. Shashi Deshpande deals with the middle-class Indian woman who represents the overwhelming majority of Indian women and is struggling to adjust in it rather than get free from the traditional world. Feminism emerged as a movement in the West during the 1830s in support of the equal rights and opportunities for women as for men. Deshpande became a renowned novelist of feminine experience. Her main concern is the urge to find

oneself, to create space for oneself to grow on one's own. The most prominent theme is the predicament of women, specially those who are educated and belong to the middle class. Her protagonists are females who are frustrated either sexually or professionally. Her novels generally center around family relationships-particularly the relationship between husband and wife and the latter's dilemmas and conflicts.

Indian writing in English is a postcolonial product expressing the state and thought of the colonized in the decolonized period. The 'novel' as a form of writing was introduced in India only in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Indian English novelists during the post-independence tried to show the tragedy of the 'partition'. Further, they presented the continuing corruption, inefficiency and misery. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan became the inaugurators of the form. Anand became essentially the man of the 1930s in thought and sensibility, politically committed to Marxian ideology and the left-wing literary movement of the period. Raja Rao's novels reveal his sensitive awareness of the forces let loose by the Gandhian Revolution as also of the thwarting and steadying pulls of past tradition. As such these novelists dealt with the sociological and historical aspects of human life from a male's point of view. They did not show interest on the problems of women in India. In a way, they were male-centric as they concentrated on the problems of men in particular. Their protagonists are all male. However, the emergence of women novelists has brought renewed life and an extended subject matter to the Indian fiction in English. Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Attia Hosain, Santha Rama Rao and Shashi Deshpande have written of Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the background of contemporary India. While doing so, they have analyzed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given

Indian women their image and role towards themselves and the society. They showed the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world.

Shashi Deshpande is a celebrity in contemporary Indian fiction in English. She has paid much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated earning wife and her recent adjustment or maladjustment in the family. She deals with the middle-class Indian woman who represents the overwhelming majority of Indian women and is struggling to adjust in it rather than get free from the traditional world. Born in Dharwad, in Karnataka, India, as the daughter of the renowned Kannada writer and Sanskrit scholar Adya Rangachar, a cerebral man who wrote plays of ideas, Deshpande became a renowned novelist of feminine experience. Deshpande has acquired from her father an intellectual bent of mind and love for reading. She enjoyed reading Dickens and Tolstoy and her novels would reveal the influence of Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing and Erica Jong. Further, her writings were stimulated by the theories of such feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Germain Greer. In one of her interviews, she herself has told thus: “When I read them, they stimulated me.... Quite late. Much after I started writing – it helped me place my own confusion and put them in order” (“A Woman’s World.... All the Way!” *Literature Alive*, 1/3, December 1987, 9).

The novels of Deshpande, become the fictionalization of personal experiences. They present a typical, middle-class housewife’s life. Her main concern is the urge to find oneself, to create space for oneself to grow on one’s own. The most prominent theme is the predicament of women, specially those who are educated and belong to the middle class. Her protagonists are females who are frustrated either sexually or professionally. Her novels generally center around family relationships-particularly the relationship between husband and wife and the

latter's dilemmas and conflicts. According to Deshpande, everyone has to live within relationships and there is no other way. She tries to convey her idea that if rules are imposed rigidly on women, it leads to family conflicts. She also does not agree with the idealization of motherhood the false and sentimental notes that accompany it. Like Atwood, a Canadian feminist writer, she too feels that women must not be reduced to the level of a breeding machines. Though Deshpande refuses to be called a 'feminist', feminist consciousness is evident in her novels. She told Geetha Gangadharan about her feminist outlook thus:

I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simon de Beavoir that "the fact that we are human, is much more important than our being men and women". I think that's my idea of feminism. (*Indian Communicator*, 20 November 1994)

Feminism emerged as a movement in the West during the 1830s in support of the equal rights and opportunities for women as for men. By 'feminism' is meant "both the awareness of women's position in society as one of disadvantage or inequality compared with that of men and also a desire to remove those disadvantages" (*Half the Sky* 3). According to Alice Jardine, feminism is a movement from the point of view of, by, and for women. Feminism sought a complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights—moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and so on. "Although feminism, which became one of the most important forces in the twentieth-century politics and thought, can take many

different forms, its common core is the thesis that the relationship between the sexes is one of inequality or oppression” (Macey 122). Thus the feminists seek to identify the causes of that inequality and to seek remedy for it.

Down the ages, the place of women in the tradition-bound, patriarchal Indian society had been very unenviable. Women were treated as mere chattels and were caged inside the four walls of the house. Freedom enjoyed by men in different fields of activity was considered a male prerogative and therefore denied to women. Moreover, Indian women have been traditionally characterized as ideally warm, gentle and submissive, who are to be kept in subordination to the male members of the family. Manu declares:

Day and night, women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family: in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons [...] Even though the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as god. (qtd.in Sharma 1)

Women were denied the right to study the Vedas, and were bracketed with sinners and slaves. The rigorous code of Manu denied women of their rights equal to men. Although her lot in the family kept changing with the times, but it invariably remained an inferior one. Still she is hardly given much freedom.

The early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an improvement in the women’s lot, which was the outcome of the movements of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Jotiba Phule. A major change was effected by Mahatma Gandhi’s emphasis on women’s participation in his non-violent movement. In an article on Gandhi entitled “Not by Faith Alone”, Ramachandra Guha observes:

Woman is the companion, Gandhiji affirmed as early as 1918 with equal mental capacities and she has the same right of freedom and liberty. He (Gandhi) dismissed the ideas put forward by Manu as an interpolation and if it was not an interpolation, he could say that in Manu's days, women did not have the status they deserved (qtd. in Sharma 2).

Despite the movements of such leaders for women's liberation, women remained a victim of social and domestic injustice. At present, the position of women is slowly but steadily improving, following their unremitting assertion of their individuality by turning their anger and resistance against the humiliating conventions assiduously nurtured by man down the ages. But one must be aware that, after all, it is still a world that belongs to man. They have yet to travel a long way to achieve their goal of taking equal position on par with men in all areas of human life.

Therefore the duty of the women writers is to write constructively to provide role models for the oppressed women. They have to reinterpret old myths and question the validity of traditions and customs that circumscribe women in narrow slots. It is true of Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy and Shashi Deshpande who, in their works, continue to challenge the operating codes of morality which subordinate women in the social structure. Deshpande is one such writer, a recent entrant into the literary scene, who portrays the new Indian woman and her dilemma in her novels. She concerns herself with the plight of the modern Indian woman trying to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and above all as a human being. Deshpande's protagonists find freedom not in

the Western sense but in conformity with the society they live in without drifting away from one's culture. She also does not believe in the theory that 'women are victims'. The 'dependency syndrome' in women is responsible for their victimization and she advocates that women need to offer resistance and emerge as strong willed individuals to face life, to share responsibilities and not to escape from it.

This sensible approach of Deshpande is expressive of her soft-minded feminism unlike hard-core feminists' stance. She craves for 'a greater sense of balance'. She, self-confessedly, feels trapped in the woman's world. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande's second novel, deals with Saru – an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife – who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonising search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relations with her husband become unbearably strained and she returns for some solace. Here she gets a chance to think over her relationships with her husband, her children, her parents and her dead brother, Dhruva. Saru's relationship with her husband becomes tainted when she gains a greater social status than her husband who develops a sense of inferiority complex and indulges in sexual sadism. Deshpande portrays Saru neither as the typical Western liberated woman nor as an orthodox Indian one. She does not let Saru overwhelmed by the militant concept of emancipation. Rather she advocates separation or divorce as a solution. But she advocates a tactful assertion of one's identity within marriage.

Saru, the protagonist of the novel, is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. As Shankar remarks : " It is the story of a marriage on the verge



of breakdown and of a woman who has been made acutely conscious of her gender since childhood” (48). Throughout the novel Deshpande maintains commendable objectivity and does not glorify Saru’s sufferings. Here she explodes the myth of man’s unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a body, a martyr and a paragon of all virtues. The title of the novel is expressive of the darkness in a person’s mind, on amount of which the person suffers from clouded vision. Darkness implies a person’s inability to see things clearly and objectively. It is the source of constant fear from the outside. It affects the outlook of the inside, but it holds no terror in itself. Through Saru’s experiences, Deshpande makes a fascinating study of male psychology which in turn becomes an exposition of the female psyche too. Here Deshpande attempts to unravel the tangles in the life of a woman who does not know if her problems are within her or outside. Saru says: “I am a skeleton in my own cupboard” (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 59). The novel reacts against the traditional concept that “Everything in a girl’s life, it seemed, was shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male” (163).

Saru’s earliest memories are those which underlined the discrimination shown by her mother in favour of her brother. “No parental love is showered on her and she is not given any importance” (27). Her brother’s birthdays and other religious rituals related to him are given top priority and celebrated with much, pomp and fanfare, whereas her birthdays are barely acknowledged. She often wonders if her birth was a cause of displeasure to her mother. Saru also recollects the joyous excitement in the house on the occasion of his naming ceremony. As Sharma aptly observes: “The idea that she is a liability to her parents is deeply implanted in her mind as a child. Her mother’s adoration of her son at her daughter’s cost is the rallying

point for the novelist to bring her feminist ideas together” (27). Thus many such scenes are etched in her mind and her mother’s gender discrimination makes a negative mark in her memory. The reason for gender discriminations is our society is a patriarchal society which considers only the male offspring as worthy enough to carry in the family line. The mother breaks Saru as a body and the second sex. Saru is made aware of her being a girl whose only asset is her body. She had also to put up with constant reminders from her mother that she was dark complexioned and should not step into the sun lest it should worsen her colour. In one of her recollections, Saru recalls her discussion with her mother thus :

“Don’t go out in the sun, you’ll get darker.”

“Who cares?”

“We have to care if you don’t. We have to get you married.”

“I don’t want to get married.”

“Why not?”

“You can’t”

“And Dhruva?”

“He’s different. He is a boy”. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 40)

This statement makes a scar in Saru’s psyche paving way for her rebellious attitude in future. Further, this sort of blatant discrimination between Saru and her brother leads to a sense of insecurity and hatred towards her parents, especially mother, and her resultant rebellious nature. The turning point in her life is the accidental death of her brother by drowning. All her life she is haunted by the memories of her mother accusing her of intentionally letting Dhruva die by drowsing : “You did it, You did this, you killed him” (173) She too on her part has a guilty conscience as she considers herself responsible for having remained a mute spectator to

her brother's death by drowning. She never refutes the charge leveled against her by her mother. Deshpande thus reveals the social aspect of keen sibling jealousy born of a mother's undue fondness for her son.

Saru defies her mother to join the medical college and now she defies her once more to marry out of her taste. She behaves against her mother's rigid conservatism. She remembers the conversation with her mother when she confronts her with her intention of marrying Manohar (Manu):

“What caste is he..?”

“I don't know.”

“A Brahmin.”

“Of course, not.”

Then cruelly.... “His takes keeps a cycle shop”

“Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?”

The word her mother had used, with the disgust, hatred and prejudice of centuries had so enraged her that she had replied.... “I hope so”(96).

Years later Saru bitterly realizes that if her mother had not been so against him, perhaps, she would not have married him and landed herself in such a position. It had been her passionate desire to hurt her mother that made her rush into marriage with Manu.

Saru considers herself the luckiest woman on earth, the initial years of her marriage are sheer bliss. Manu is her saviour who rescues Saru –a damsel in distress. She expresses her ecstasy thus:

I became in an instant a physically aroused woman with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, with a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved... (40)

She feels happy in her dingy one-room apartment with “corridors smelling urine, the rooms with their dark sealed in odors” (40). It is a “heaven on earth” for her. But soon she realizes that it is a mere mirage for her and for her happiness only an illusion. Until Saru starts earning, she seems quite content with her life. But, eventually he begins to miss the small things that money can buy and resents Manu’s acceptance of such a kind of living. She feels discontented. Saru begins to hate this man-woman relationship which is based on need and attraction on the body and not love. She feels a gradual disappearance of love and attachment towards her husband and children. The most solemn duties towards them remain unattended to. Saru’s goals are higher and she wants to specialize in order to achieve it. Boozie, a handsome and efficient doctor, who is flirtatious helps her financially to set up her own practice in a posh area. Even when Boozie deliberately displays his affection for her in public before the staring eyes of all invitees to the inauguration of her consulting room, Saru feels more resentful towards her husband than to him. Gradually Saru’s social status and financial status grows far beyond that of her husband. Saru becomes a busy, successful doctor in contrast to Manu who is an underpaid lecturer in a third rate college. Deshpande, however, proves that in the institution of marriage, an economically independent woman is still bound in shackles and must forever live in fear of hurting the ego of her husband. Saru makes a bitter observation in this connection : “ $a+b$  they told us in mathematics is equal to  $b+a$ . but here  $a+b$  was not, definitely not equal to  $b+a$ . It became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible” (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 42).

The rift between Saru and her husband gradually widens and one unfortunate incident blows the lid off the simmering pot. It changes Manu to behave like a wild animal at night when he begins to physically abuse her in the privacy of their room. A girl who comes home to interview Saru for a magazine innocently asks Manu : “ How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well ?” (200). At that moment, Manu, Saru and the interviewer laugh over it as if it did not matter. But later that night, Manu gives vent to his feelings by attacking her like a wild animal. The next morning he feigns complete ignorance of his own actions the previous night and appears normal in every way. The nightmarish incident later in response to another similar, tactless remark made by Manu’s colleague and his wife. Looking at the newly bought suitcase Manu’s colleague foment that thy are lucky to be able to afford such a trip. His wife replies tartly that he probably could have afforded it, had he married a doctor. An insulted Manu vents his frustration once more on Saru that night making her a victim of his bestiality, as she later relates the incident to her father.

I never know till then he had so much strength in him. I couldn’t fight back. I couldn’t shout or cry. I was so afraid the children in the next room would hear. I could do nothing. I can never do anything I just endure (201).

Unable to hear the torture any longer, Saru returns to her parents’ home—a place she had vowed never to come back to. Saru dwells upon this at length in her father’s house and tries to objectively analyse her share of the blame in the disaster that her marriage has been. Her ruminations make her think, “My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood”(217).

Saru's arduous journey in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is an initiation into the mystery of human existence. She realizes that parental home is no refuge. Neither her father nor her mother can provide her shelter. She is her own refuge. Saru's journey is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from the negation to assertion, from difference to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self, "And oh yes, Baba, if Manu comes, Tell him to wait. I'll be back as soon as I can". This is the assertion of her individuality, her willingness to accept reality and not to escape from it.

Saru's conflict is a woman's conflict between the desired and the imposed; the willed and the unwilled. Deshpande tries to repudiate the myth that women find fulfillment only in marriage. Deshpande thinks that a woman's life is her own and the time has come when a woman must rethink as an individual and not merely as a woman. It is the wife who has to break away from the old images of womanhood and assert her way, shape her life fearlessly, without feeling any guilt for deviation from the tradition rooted role-models of Ghandari and Savitri. Deshpande's Saru, at the end, shuns extremes and takes a practical view of the circumstances. Through the act of Saru, Deshpande does not let herself get overwhelmed by the Western feminism or its militant concept of emancipation through divorce or separation. Rather she does advocates her women characters an assertion of one's identity within marriage.

Deshpande is specifically committed to re-define female subjectivity. She, in a way, deconstructs the idea of 'Indian woman' generally related to a sacrificing, non-assertive, satisfied being and a submissive body and traces of her positioning in a system of 'difference'. She focuses on the contemporary world's cultural, social, structural and professional inequality between man and woman. With their education and their social awareness these women desire to overcome 'dependence syndrome' and have an urge for self-definition, but also care for

sensitive family relationships and emotional involvement of the self. The complex situations in the lives of professional women have changed the picture of Indian families. They no longer wish to be treated as a mere body for man's sexual gratification.

Deshpande tries to dismantle this androcentric images of woman as the mother-protector, inspirer, and motivating force, as the object of desire, weakling, and dependent on man. Her women protagonists are educated, strong-willed, questioning and career-oriented protagonists who negating the traditional 'feminine' characteristic journey towards self realization and self-discovery after a series of introspection about their life and the roles they play conforming to the standards of Indian womanhood. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Deshpande analyses the problems of the professional woman's experience regarding her role conflict, marital stress, dilemma, fatigue and above all sexual assault from her husband.

The prologue narrates Saru's nightmarish experience of rape at the hands of a stranger who, Saru realizes eventually, is no other than her own husband Manohar. Manohar, a normal loving person during daytime becomes a brutal monster at night. The prologue describes how the female body is forcibly taken possession of by a man. The very act of man's brutal behaviour is disastrous, as the woman has been silenced. Silence becomes the reality for the woman, as words are strangled and the body subjugated. The sweet sensations, even if felt, are consigned to the silence of pain. "From the very beginning, Deshpande has underlined the fact that the female body is a site of forced occupation /colonization in which the master has the will and freedom to use and abuse it" (Baral 86). Of late the body has emerged as an important site for study in feminist discourse. Feminist argue that the "Phallocentric culture" alienates a woman from her body. Luce Irigaray writes:

It is important for us to guard and keep our bodies and at the same time take them emerge from the silence and subjugation. Historically, we are the guardians of the flesh: we do not have to abandon that guardianship, but to identify it as ours by inviting men not to make us 'their bodies', guarantors of their bodies. (qtd in. Baral 84)

Thus the body becomes the very medium through which femininity is specialized and sexualized being produced "by blending the biological fact of womanhood with its ideological or cultural dimension" (Niranjana 120).

Saru could not bear the sexual torture of her husband who suffers from inferiority complex and sexual sadism due to his wife's career advancement. Panic and terror mounting in her could only tolerate it with silence and could not even scream. She feels "... monstrous invasion of my body. I tried to move, twisting my body, wriggling under the weight that pinned it down. It was impossible. I was pinioned to a position of abject surrender of myself" (*The Dark Holds No Terrors* 12). The prologue narrates the terrific experience of a wife in sex by her husband's beastly behaviour. Saru is one such woman who emotionally recapitulates her pains thus:

The small pains merged all at once into one large one. And still the body above mine, hard and tense, went on with its rhythmic movements. The hands continued their quest for new areas of pain. Now the horror of what was happening to me was lost in a fierce desire to end it. I could not, would not, bear it. I began to fight back, hopelessly, savagely. (12)



The prologue gives a powerful description of the terrifying nightly ordeal of Saru and focuses upon her humiliation and also on the sexual power politics between man and woman. In fact, a female body's fulfilment comes only in the bonding with a male body, in marriage or otherwise, and the same is the case with a male body. But marriage, instead of leading Saru to the avenue of all enjoyments, gets fractured where bodily gratification becomes an illusion and remains a brute force. Sexual sadism must be differentiated from normal sexual arousal, behaviour, and experimentation. Some forms of mild aggression, such as "love bites" or scratching, are within the range of normal behaviour during sexual intercourse. Sadism should be differentiated from sadomasochistic behaviour that involves only mild pain and/ or the simulation of more dangerous pain. The diagnosis of sexual sadism is based on the results of a psychiatrist's interview with the patient. In some cases, a person with sexual sadism may be referred to a specialized clinic for the treatment of sexual disorders. Behaviour therapy is often used to treat paraphilias. Therapies involving cognitive restructuring and social skills training are also often used. Medication may be given to reduce fantasies and behaviour relating to paraphilias.

Manu's sexual molestation of Saru is the result of his assertion of 'manliness' over her. "His purpose, though repressed in subconscious is to "punish" her for taking on the "male" role and to assert his superiority and power through physical violence" (Atrey and Kirpaul 43). It is equivalent to rape. As Alison M. Jaggar explains: "Rape is typically an art performed by men and its social meaning is to degrade and 'feminize' the victim"(263). Under such circumstances Saru, being helpless against his strength, has to surrender her body in pain into total submission. Here sex, instead of a pleasurable activity, becomes a 'rape' in which the woman is treated merely an object of the man's gratification, is forcibly violated, or is

disallowed self-expression during love-making, the chances of her being sexually abused. In spite of her education and career, Saru finds herself in such a dilemma. Deshpande here makes a critique of sexual violence or assault perpetrated against women in the name of patriarchal institution called marriage. Deshpande defines marriage as “trap” and “cage” but still her women do not walk out of it, rather, they try to solve their problems within it. In an interview with Prasanna Sree, she affirms this point:

Liberation never means doing without the family. No, no, no. To me liberation does not mean leaving your marriage. Liberation means you refuse to be oppressed, you refuse to give up your individuality, you refuse to do things which go against your conscience. You realize the potential you have within you....(qtd. in Ray and Gundu 175)

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